



Memo

Date: July 22, 2020
To: Seattle City Council
From: Seattle Department of Construction & Inspections (SDCI)
Seattle Department of Neighborhoods (DON)
Subject: Update on Virtual Design Review, Historic Preservation and Major Institution Board and Committee Meetings (Ordinance 126072)

This memo serves as an update on the work being done by SDCI to hold virtual Design Review Board meetings while still under the COVID-19 public health emergency, as outlined in Ordinance 126072. An update on DON's work to launch virtual meetings of the City's historic preservation boards and major institution advisory committees is also provided.

Virtual Design Review Board meetings (SDCI)

SDCI recognizes and values the importance of public and community engagement in the Design Review process and wants to ensure that we are setting up the best available virtual platform for that to occur. This will include plain language instructions for the general public on joining and participating via written and audio comments (if possible) in our online meetings, which will be added to the public notices and the Design Review website. SDCI is also re-launching our updated Shaping Seattle mobile-first map application in July which is a robust tool designed for community use to understand the permitting process, with an emphasis on Design Review projects.

The challenges of holding virtual Design Review Board meetings are threefold: 1) the volume of Board meetings is significant, 2) the ability to replicate the nuances and interactions of a typical Board meeting to ensure an efficient and constructive meeting which involve multiple external parties with designated speaking/presentation roles and 3) identifying the expertise and designated staffing necessary to run the technology during these meetings. The eight Design Review Boards (including 42 board members) meet [twice monthly](#) Mondays through Thursdays for a total of approximately 192 meetings per year.

We are steadily working towards the goal of virtual Design Review Board meetings and have spent time investigating the three available platforms: Skype, MS Teams, and (more recently) Webex. After gathering the various requirements needed to identify the best technology platform (see Attachment 1), it was determined that Skype was insufficient for meeting our requirements and MS Teams involved several logistical issues that affected the ability for us to establish a replicable model that can meet the frequency of our meetings. Fortunately, Seattle IT accelerated the procurement of Cisco Webex platform which was deployed citywide on June 18th. We believe that this platform will best satisfy the requirements needed for our meetings (see Attachment 2: Table Comparing Virtual Meeting Platform Options and Attachment 3: Seattle IT Design Review Online Meeting Decision Paper). Additionally, and critical to the success of this pilot, SDCI is in the process of hiring technical staffing resources to run the technology during all board meetings, allowing staff and the Board to focus on the meeting substance. This part time, temporary position will set up the online meetings and pilot the technology during each of these meetings. This will allow the single SDCI Land Use Planner that currently attends and co-facilitates the meetings with the Board chair to continue to focus on the meeting agenda and content.

Our intent is to launch Design Review virtual meetings as a pilot effort with selected projects in early August allowing us to assess, learn and adjust our practices accordingly as we grow towards the full Design Review Board calendar capacity.

Virtual meetings of historic preservation boards and major institution advisory committees (DON)

Pursuant to Ordinance 126072, DON is preparing to launch virtual meetings of the City's historic preservation boards and major institution advisory committees, and successfully held the first Landmarks Preservation Board meeting on July 1. Like SDCI, DON staff reviewed multiple online meeting platforms and determined Cisco Webex best satisfies the procedural requirements of its boards and committees; however, alternative solutions to address closed-captioning and language translation needs are still being explored. DON also anticipates using Microsoft Forms to collect public comment at meetings.

DON is also working to identify staffing resources for every historic preservation board and major institution advisory committee meeting. Most of DON's boards and committees are supported by just one staff person who is responsible for facilitating proceedings, maintaining records of decisions, and serving as a technical advisor to board members and project applicants. Fulfilling all of these roles while simultaneously managing new IT infrastructure is more than one person can feasibly handle. Additionally, the number of meetings scheduled each month (often more than a dozen across Historic Preservation and Major Institutions and Schools programs), the length of the meetings, and existing pressures on staff capacity impede DON's ability to assign multiple staff to each meeting.